

# State of Public Outdoor Access 2026



THE OUTDOOR ACCESS COMMISSION



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## The Outdoor Access Commission

PO Box 11181  
Manners St  
Wellington 6142

Telephone 04 815 8502

[www.herengaanuku.govt.nz](http://www.herengaanuku.govt.nz)

[info@herengaanuku.govt.nz](mailto:info@herengaanuku.govt.nz)

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# Introduction

This is the first Outdoor Access Commission report on the state of public access in New Zealand. It collates what we do and do not know about public outdoor access, highlights some key issues and identifies future challenges for Aotearoa to address.



We believe it is important to initiate this report on the state of public access because regular, transparent reporting will help us safeguard public access rights, maintain focus and ensure fair, inclusive use of the outdoors for all. This report identifies gaps in our knowledge and opens up a conversation about what we do and do not know about public outdoor access. Over the years to come we want iterations of this report to fill those gaps.

Many government organisations, tangata whenua organisations, councils, local community groups, private landowners, and other individuals support public access across New Zealand.

Public access to the outdoors is essential to public health and wellbeing. It offers physical recreation opportunities to all New Zealanders, often with no required equipment, or pre-planned time commitments. Other benefits include community cohesion, and educational opportunities through sharing stories of places. Access also supports environmental restoration through community groups that focus on replanting, weeding, and predator removal.

We balance public access with other public expectations, such as caring for our environment, supporting the mana whenua rights of tangata whenua, protecting people's safety and respecting private land rights.

Our legislated role in mapping public access in New Zealand puts us in a unique position to develop a comprehensive technical understanding of the state of public access in Aotearoa.

This report proposes some simple ways we can continue to grow and support public access by giving local communities more control of their walkways, exploring opportunities to enhance public access through investment-related processes, promoting public access in forests, and digitising more public land parcels.

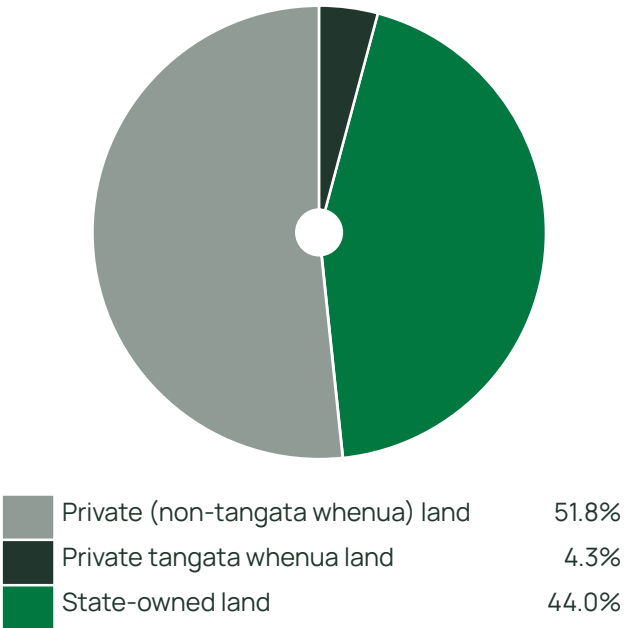
**Don Cameron**



Board chair

# The state of public access

Types of land in Aotearoa



Public access to the outdoors in New Zealand spans a mix of land types. A wide range of government organisations, tangata whenua organisations, councils, non-government organisations, local community groups, private land owners, and others have roles in creating, protecting, and enhancing public access.

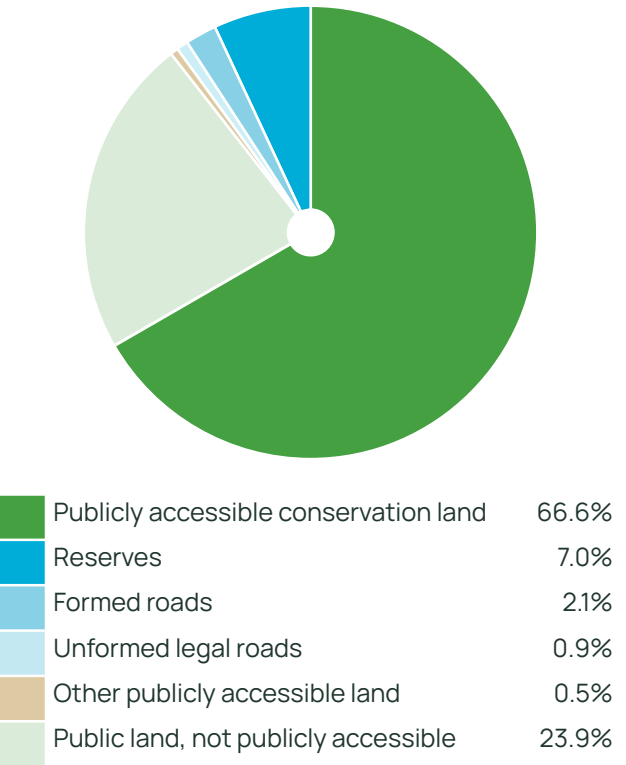
The charts on this page and the next collate data from our Public Access Areas (PAA) dataset and other sources.

A proportion of New Zealand's publicly accessible land is not visible on maps because it has not yet been digitised. This means we do not have a complete picture of public access in Aotearoa.

We have an ongoing challenge of protecting, creating, and enhancing public access to the outdoors that is practical and accessible for the majority of our people.

Access to outdoor spaces is uneven across different

State-owned land



communities in New Zealand. Factors that influence how people access the outdoors include socioeconomic status, culture, and geography.

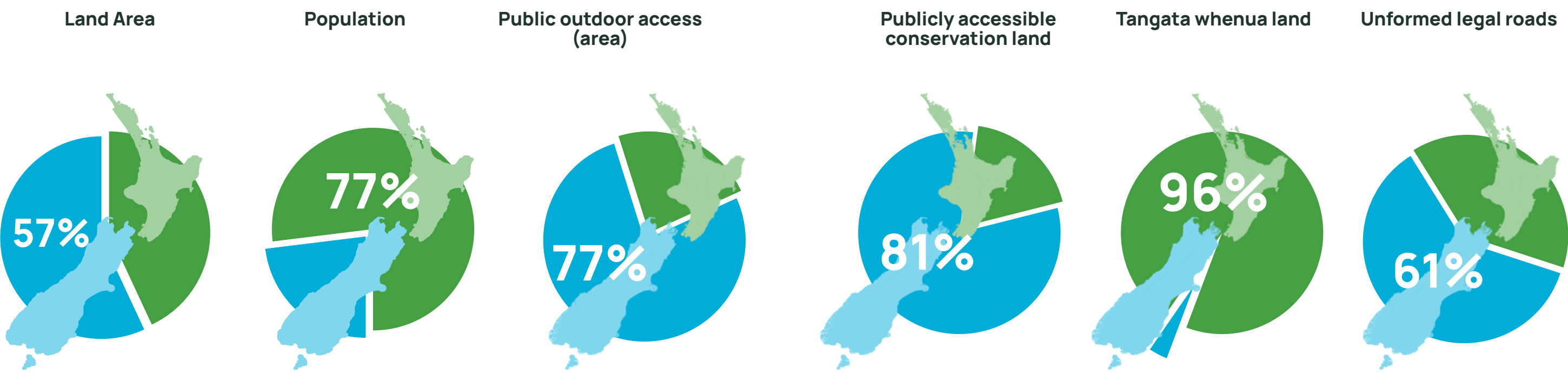
There is currently no national framework specifically designed to assess and acquire land with public access value. Indeed, funding for maintaining and enhancing public outdoor access is a pressure for many local authorities and government organisations.

**Data sources**

- Stats NZ — Census 2023 (population, regional boundaries)
- LINZ — Central Record of State Land dataset, July 2025 (state-owned land)
- Te Puni Kokiri — Māori Land Court Data, 2022 (tangata whenua land)
- Outdoor Access Commission — PAA, October 2025 (publicly accessible conservation land, reserves, formed and unformed legal roads)



# Geographical variances — North and South



Comparing the North Island to the South Island and Stewart Island shows that many types of public access connectivity are possible – some on public land, some on private land. Each community faces its own challenges. Public access starts with relationships between different stakeholders. It is not always about the amount of land, but the quality of connections across the whenua.

Lowest value  
Highest value

	Population	Land area (ha)	State land area (%)	Tangata whenua land area (%)	Private land (%)
Northland	198,500	1,254,190	19	6.8	74
Auckland	1,755,200	492,235	19	1.1	80
Waikato	516,800	2,461,802	22	10.9	67
Bay of Plenty	346,500	1,228,779	37	16.5	46
Gisborne	52,300	838,543	17	22.9	61
Hawkes Bay	179,000	1,420,215	17	10.9	72
Taranaki	129,400	726,006	23	3.4	73
Manawatū/Whanganui	257,800	2,222,670	25	7.0	68
Wellington	538,000	812,646	30	0.8	69
Nelson/Tasman	113,400	1,007,449	71	0.2	29
Marlborough	50,800	1,051,151	59	0.2	40
West Coast	33,900	2,332,697	88	0.2	12
Canterbury	676,600	4,522,232	49	0.1	51
Otago	248,500	3,190,090	44	0.1	56
Southland	102,700	3,189,985	65	1.0	33

Publicly accessible land (ha)	Categories of publicly accessible land (ha)				
	Publicly accessible conservation land	Reserves	Roads	Unformed legal roads	Other publicly accessible areas
186,817	106,076	55,489	18,250	6,924	77
89,751	15,869	27,978	18,384	2,371	25,149
419,693	306,934	63,927	31,992	6,335	10,506
313,189	241,352	55,840	11,281	3,705	1,012
79,745	59,657	10,408	6,842	2,659	179
201,673	177,231	8,261	12,448	2,735	998
164,784	138,507	7,882	11,128	6,217	1,050
439,761	371,292	32,206	25,457	9,565	1,241
201,467	127,070	33,565	9,776	1,892	29,163
514,656	368,422	89,405	21,057	5,598	30,175
497,984	264,332	221,138	4,707	6,356	1,451
1,975,755	1,864,204	89,038	10,280	12,185	49
1,337,933	1,185,162	88,437	40,959	16,745	6,630
721,029	616,887	56,976	26,188	16,899	4,079
1,880,661	1,813,360	39,353	17,817	9,828	303

# Public access challenges in 2025

Many people’s outdoor access challenges relate to accessing existing public access rather than creating new access.



## Appointing a controlling authority

A controlling authority is the entity responsible for managing and maintaining a publicly accessible walkway gazetted under the Walking Access Act 2008. The controlling authority must be a public body such as the Department of Conservation, a local authority, the Outdoor Access Commission or the Commissioner of Crown Lands. Current provisions in the Act do not allow a non-public body, such as a community group or iwi, to take on this role.

However, finding a public body willing to take on the role is increasingly challenging due to the time and costs associated with development, infrastructure, and maintenance of a walkway.

Access is increasingly being managed and maintained by community trusts, iwi, and local volunteer groups, albeit not formally as controlling authorities, but with a written agreement with an overseeing controlling authority.



## Private occupation of unformed legal roads

The public can access the outdoors through unformed legal roads, colloquially known as paper roads. Unformed legal roads (ULRs) are exactly what their name suggests – parcels of land designated as legal roads but not always physically constructed. They can be a great recreational asset, providing public access to the outdoors. However, they’re often physically indistinguishable from private land and are not shown on topo maps.

New Zealand has an estimated 55,000km of ULRs. Many ULRs are inaccessible because adjoining landholders occupy ULRs as part of existing farm or forestry activities, and territorial authorities have long accepted this use. However, this does not create any legal right to the road in favour of the adjoining landholder. The right of public access remains.



## Overseas Investment Act priorities

The Overseas Investment Act can provide opportunities to enhance public access as part of land purchases by overseas owners. These can focus on providing and improving Access to coastlines, rivers, lakes, reservation land, hunting and fishing areas and recreational areas. To achieve this, the commission endeavours, where possible, to provide advice and non-mandatory recommendations on these applications with significant access implications when the Overseas Investment Office is processing them.



## Tangata whenua land access and use

Over a quarter of whenua Māori is landlocked, hundreds of thousands of hectares. Landlocked land is land that does not have reasonable access to it. For instance, it is surrounded by other blocks and has no road, driveway or easement leading to it, or the unformed legal road is not traversable.

These land blocks are often isolated, extremely steep and rugged. In some cases, while there is theoretical access across this public land, it is not practical to traverse, or it is accessible only to walkers who can undertake a long tramp.

This landlocked land is a longstanding and fraught issue. It came about as millions of hectares of land were confiscated, compulsorily acquired and purchased in historically complex legal circumstances. The small amounts of Māori land that remained following this are often cut off and isolated. The history that led to the creation of these landlocked blocks is a legacy of historical land alienation that continues to affect access and use.

Many of these blocks have become informal extensions to neighbouring farms or used by recreationists from neighbouring public conservation land. The tangata whenua owners are often unable to access their land or mobilise as a group to manage it.



# Public access successes in 2025

Many local communities are undertaking projects to provide free, certain, enduring, and practical walking access to the outdoors.



## Growth of cycleways

Community trusts and groups are regularly establishing cycleways and shared-use paths. This massive economic boom in cycleways, both urban and rural, is part of an increasing overlap between conservation groups, community groups that facilitate access and other recreational groups. Most cycle groups are very well organised and know what they want.

The popularity and success of cycling means that, in some cases, council-led organisations are seeking out biking communities to develop networks of trails for regions or towns. There is a growing focus on connecting existing trails. Previously, local groups developed small local trails. Now, people are looking at linking up trails across different council areas and regions.

For instance, the Central Otago region has gone from a collection of local tracks targeted at tourists in the Wakatipu Basin to a broader network including commuter trails and links to Cromwell and Arrowtown. Cromwell links with Wānaka, Clyde, the Central Otago Rail Trail, the Roxburgh Gorge Trail, Lawrence, and others.

The new tracks that cyclists instigate are often shared pathways, which benefit walkers as well.



## Department of Conservation Hunting and Fishing Charter

This charter, signed by the Minister in November 2024, establishes guiding principles for the Department of Conservation (DOC) to make clear and transparent access decisions on public conservation land. The charter makes it easier for New Zealanders to go hunting and fishing.

The charter's first principle is that the public has a right to access public conservation land and waters, including for recreational hunting and fishing. DOC guarantees this access, and where restrictions need to be placed to limit access, it will clearly explain why.

This new charter outlines the principles and commitments to ensure that recreational hunting and fishing on public conservation land and waters are recognised and safeguarded for current and future generations. It balances recreational users' rights and responsibilities with the imperative to conserve New Zealand's natural heritage.



## Advocacy of local access issues one-by-one

Most improvements in public outdoor access result from communities or individuals working together to resolve local issues or develop new access.

Every location differs, with different local aspirations, connections to mana whenua, land owners, and links to surrounding public access networks. The commission's experience is that recent enduring and sustainable public access successes have happened one-by-one, in local communities, rather than as a result of a single national strategy or policy change.

For instance, forestry company OneFortyOne New Zealand Limited has established regular meetings with the Nelson, Tasman and Marlborough outdoor recreation communities to ensure improved public access over easements into the Mount Richmond Forest Park.

On the West Coast, locals have helped improve access in Ruatapu-Tōtara Lagoon/the beach, Charleston — Tōtara River, Chatterbox Creek and Crooked River.



## Mapping and Pocket Maps

We rebuilt our Public Access Areas (PAA) dataset from scratch to provide a much more comprehensive, accurate, and detailed view of where public access exists.

In 2025, the commission launched a new data pipeline with an automated, repeatable process for identifying public access in New Zealand.

The data represented in this report all comes from this updated dataset. The PAA is the most accurate understanding we have had of public access in New Zealand.

However, it is not complete. In particular a lot of public access that already exists over private land that was created prior to the digitisation of the cadastre by LINZ is not included. Digitising these records would improve the comprehensiveness of our understanding of public access.

The Pocket Maps app has made public access areas more visible and searchable. It allows users to view public access areas and conservation land across Aotearoa from their device, anytime and anywhere.

Users can view maps online with an internet connection and download them to view them offline, while out in the wild, ensuring that they can identify public areas.

# Ngā take o ngā tangata whenua

The relationship between tangata whenua and land is intricate and deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and legal contexts. Almost all public access issues have a potential tangata whenua dimension.



## Ahu whenua blocks

Ture whenua lands are those that Māori retained after British settlement or received as compensation for other land taken by the Crown.

Ture whenua land includes Māori freehold, customary land, Māori reserve land and court-held land. Ture whenua land is the largest portion of land owned by Māori. It comprises agriculture, forestry, horticulture and regenerating land.

There are approximately 8,000 ture whenua land blocks. These blocks represent about 4% (1,300,000 hectares) of the land originally owned by Māori. Groups of related whānau typically own these remnant land blocks. Just under half of ture whenua lands are currently classed as under-utilised. These blocks are often in rugged, steep locations or are too small to support primary industries. Native forest often lacks the natural food and material resources to sustain traditional Māori uses.

However, these blocks often provide ecological benefits through regenerating forests.

We have no measure for quantifying how the public uses this land but, anecdotally, it is typical for neighbouring farmers or recreationists to use tangata whenua land of this type informally. These blocks often connect to neighbouring publicly accessible lands and reserves.

Ture whenua lands commonly sit near public tracks and trails, and in many instances, they provide key links to a network of public access tracks.



## Tiriti settlement whenua

Tiriti settlement whenua refers to land returned to iwi or pan-iwi groups via te Tiriti o Waitangi settlement process. Tiriti settlement whenua typically includes former Crown forests, reserves, and lake beds. Two examples of extensive forests returned to settlement entities are Te Urewera National Park and Kaingaroa Forest.

All Tiriti settlement whenua have their own legislation and customised legal status.

Although Tiriti settlement whenua is much smaller overall than ture whenua land, it is relevant to outdoor public access. Much settlement land contains public access requirements as a condition of the settlement.



## The public-private dichotomy

Legally, land might seem to be classified as completely private or public. In reality, the situation is more complex and sometimes not simple. For example, mana whenua look to a collective kaitiakitanga for land within their rohe, but this is distinct from private land ownership, Tiriti settlements, or ahu whenua governance.

Similarly, there can be ambiguities on private land regarding access according to long-standing protocols, relationships and legal instruments – some recorded and some not. For one group, the land or part of it is effectively open to access, but for others, it is not. Thus, there can be grey areas in what might seem like a black and white legal worldview.



# Opportunities

The following simple opportunities would improve public access in New Zealand while costing either nothing or relatively little.

1.

**Create access to water and land through the OIO process**

Facilitate the creation of esplanade strips along waterways wider than 3 metres, around lakes, and along the coast for overseas investments in sensitive land in New Zealand.

This replicates provisions related to marginal strips under the Conservation Act and esplanade strips on subdivision under the Resource Management Act.

Encourage practical access provisions across investments in sensitive land to get to adjacent public conservation land. Many forestry lands and high country properties in the South Island border on public conservation land. This would especially enhance access for hunters.

2.

**Uphold Public Access Easement rights in plantation forests**

Explore amendments to the Crown Forest Assets Act and resulting licences and leases to require owners and lessees to maintain a Public Access Easement for the public so the infrastructure does not degrade.

3.

**Digitise paper-based easement parcels in the cadastre to give existing public access visibility**

Resource LINZ to digitise its existing paper-based easement parcels so that New Zealanders have visibility of existing public access that is not currently visible in digital map systems.

4.

**Establish a fund for placing easements on land**

Develop a fund for purchasing land with strategic public access value when it comes up for sale. Use the opportunity to place an easement on the land guaranteeing public access in perpetuity and resell the land. Use the sale proceeds for future short-term land purchases with strategic public access value.

5.

**Allow community groups to be controlling authorities**

Allow the community to be responsible for walkways. Amend section 35 of the Walking Access Act 2008 to expand the definition of controlling authorities to include non-public bodies, such as community and tangata whenua groups with the capability to take on the role of controlling authority.

This aligns with recommendation 22 of the 2018 Independent Review of the Walking Access Act.





